

The Real Fake

AUTHENTICITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF
SPACE

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Introduction

Welcome to Thames Town. Taste authentic British style of small town. Enjoy sunlight, enjoy nature, enjoy your life & holiday. Dreaming of Britain, Live in Thames Town.

This greeting, on a sign hanging from a medieval facade, welcomes visitors to a charming English village. Everything in Thames Town is quintessentially English, from the Gothic church to the Tudor- and Victorian-style buildings. The cobblestone streets, red phone boxes, and statues of Churchill and Lady Diana offer visitors England at its best. Only one detail complicates the picture: Thames Town is in China. Located in Songjiang New Town, outside of Shanghai, Thames Town is a British-themed village built a decade ago as part of Shanghai's One City, Nine Towns city plan. The plan proposed a polycentric growth model with ten new urban centers, each themed after a European country.

Designed by Atkins, a British consultancy group, and completed in 2006, Thames Town extends over one square kilometer (less than half a mile) and is enclosed within an artificial lake and network of canals. The open-access, pedestrian downtown includes a mixed-use center and residential compounds with five-to-six-

story housing. Six gated residential communities surround the downtown area: Hampton Garden, Rowland Heights, Nottingham Garden, Leeds Garden, Windsor Island, and Kensington Garden, the last of which is the only gated area with terrace houses instead of single villas.

Thames Town is many places at once: a successful tourist destination, an affluent residential cluster, a city of migrants—and a ghost town. The downtown area is an important center of the Shanghai prewedding photography industry. Professional photographers capture dozens of engaged couples in a standardized sequence of poses—the romantic proposal, the candid smile, and the happily-ever-after ending. The pictures will be exhibited the day of the wedding, displaying bride and groom in a variety of matching outfits—the fairy-tale prince and princess, Mao's Red Guards, American newlyweds. The engaged couples have become an attraction in their own right, to the point that tourists visit the village to enjoy the extravagant styles of future brides and grooms.

But Thames Town is also a spectral Potemkin village that houses less than a quarter of the ten thousand people it was planned for. Occupancy remains low because most owners had no intention of living there and only purchased properties as a form of investment—real estate values tripled between 2006 and 2012. While the gated communities are about half-full, the condominiums downtown remain semiabandoned. The open windows, hanging laundry, and parked scooters that one sees in these downtown residential areas belong almost exclusively to squatting migrant workers. Employed in the local construction business, these migrants occupy the vacant units downtown. While the residents object to the presence of the migrants outside of work hours within the gated communities, they tolerate the workers in the less iconic downtown areas.

As an Italian architect trained in historic preservation, I was taught to reject the replication of ancient buildings. Mainstream preservation and design theories tell us that the authentic dimension of heritage is neither negotiable nor reproducible. What I understood, once I approached Thames Town, is that those conversations do not do justice to the nuances and complexities of

places like that village. The language of “real” and “fake” fails to capture the ways the Britishness of Thames Town triggers the enthusiasm of its users, who both enjoy and construct its atmosphere in spontaneous and unexpected ways. It is the uses people make of it and the sentiments they feel that transform Thames Town into a unique place in space and time. On the one hand, this village typifies the surreal, exclusionary, and controlling aspects that scholars have long associated with themed settings. On the other hand, the Chinese residents and tourists create their own Thames Towns for themselves, genuinely and consciously enjoying the synthetic historicity.

I realized that in order to understand this Chinese-English pastiche, I had to suspend judgment on what was “real” and what was “fake,” a distinction that was the inheritance of my own cultural lens. Rather, I needed to look at how the users’ ideas of “real” and “fake” concretize in their understanding of “the authentic” and at how this understanding affects their everyday habits and uses of spaces.

In *The Real Fake*, I will argue that the notion of authenticity underlies the physical and social production of space. This becomes apparent in Thames Town, where the themed atmosphere influences the personal and spatial relationships among and within each group of users—the engaged couples, the residents, the tourists, the guards, and the migrant workers. These different groups produce the spaces of Thames Town by understanding, exploiting, and complicating ideas of the “authentic” British atmosphere. The Western appearance of the built environment triggers the enthusiasm of the residents and visitors, who willingly modify their behaviors to enhance their own experience of the British atmosphere. At the same time, the sets of aesthetic and moral codes that residents associate with the English theme marginalize those who do not look like they belong or act “appropriately.”

The seemingly antithetical spaces of Thames Town—the crowded themed core; the exclusive gated communities; the vacant units downtown; and the informal gatherings of migrant workers—share a similarity. Their physical and social production depends on how both those who created Thames Town—politicians,

developers, and designers—and those who use it—residents, tourists, and employees—interpret and negotiate ideas of authenticity. It is not only that the authentic English atmosphere was fabricated ad hoc to attract residents and consumers but also that this kind of atmosphere influences how people behave. Notions of authenticity, then, underlie the production, consumption, and contestation of all the spaces of Thames Town. Although their uses and users diverge, the spaces of Thames Town are the spaces that authenticity makes.

In using the term “authenticity,” I acknowledge and embrace all of its associated ambiguities. The word “authentic” broadly refers to ideas of identity, genuineness, and originality. But authenticity is, above all, about an unresolved tension between permanence and change. We concern ourselves with authenticity when the world that we inhabit changes. As things around us are transformed, we instinctively long for what is gone, though it may never have really existed the way we remember it. It is not a coincidence, then, that preoccupations with “the authentic” emerged in tandem with the socioeconomic transformations of eighteenth-century Europe (Berman 1970). In the last three decades, especially, authenticity has emerged as a potent branding tool to motivate consumers and attract capital (Banet-Weiser 2012). Scholars of urban studies are increasingly aware that the quest for authenticity affects the production and consumption of urban landscapes. People’s desire to live and experience “the authentic” in the city underlies phenomena such as gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2009; Zukin 2008), preservation and place making (Jive’n and Larkham 2003; Ouf 2001), cultural tourism and commodification of ethnic neighborhoods (Rath 2007; Shaw et al. 2004), and the Disneyfication of leisure areas (Judd and Fainstein 1999).

Yet scholars have paid little, if any, systematic attention to how authenticity actually functions to shape the physical and social production of space. Taking on this task, I follow the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) in understanding the production of space as a process in which a city’s users participate through their everyday spatial practices and emotions. This process involves the physical organization of space as well as the

constant arrangement, negotiation, and possible subversion of the social relationships that affect and are reflected in space. In Lefebvre's terms, the "production of space" is an enterprise that involves three simultaneous dimensions: conceived, perceived, and lived spaces. Conceived space is "the dominant space of any society" (38–39) and pertains to the mental and creative constructs that architects, urbanists, and scientists conceptualize and represent through pure symbols and rules. Perceived space corresponds to the concrete environment that people experience in their daily lives through spatial practices. Finally, lived space is the realm of users and inhabitants that includes and expands the perceived and the conceived dimensions. Lived space is the "dominated space" (39) that we inhabit, contest, and construct in our everyday lives. The perceived-conceived-lived spaces, which Lefebvre refers to as the trialectics of space, cannot be treated as an abstract product, endlessly reproducible and equal to itself. Rather, space is an oeuvre, a work that is always transforming and constantly being produced through bodily and emotionally contingent everyday practices.

I interpret urban authenticity as a dynamic relationship between people, places, and meanings that generates urban transformations. As a process of urban change, authenticity underlies the conceived, perceived, and lived dimensions of the production of space. Urban managers conceive spaces that convey dominant understandings of authenticity. Aesthetically edited in order to represent "the authentic," these built environments favor the attraction of capital, establish normalizing sets of behaviors that control the citizen/consumer, and marginalize those who do not look or act in accordance with those norms. The city's users, however, are not passive consumers of these landscapes. They construct their own way of valuing the authentic through their spatial practices—perceiving, negotiating, and at times contesting the narratives of authenticity that are represented in urban spaces. Engaging with the physical and symbolic dimensions of space, city users transform spaces of conceived and represented authenticity into authentic lived spaces.

Thames Town and themed spaces more broadly provide us with the ideal setting for examining these dynamics. Conceived in order to convey a sense of the authentic—although initially of another place and time—themed settings become a stage for spontaneous significations and appropriations. The users of the themed city make use of, attribute, and negotiate meanings and thereby transform the themed, staged sets into unique spaces.

Places like Thames Town are all over China. Entire cities replicating Venice, Paris, and other iconic Western destinations have been erected *ex novo*. These transplanted cityscapes—which I call “simulacrascapes,” following Bianca Bosker (2013)—lend prestige and help market new suburbs. Since the 1990s, the end of the *danwei* system, land and housing reforms, and the subsequent urbanization boom have made home ownership a symbol of social status. Developers and political authorities have rebranded the suburbs in an attempt to alter the traditional homeowners’ preference for the city center and attract residents to the peripheries. Offering iconic themed residential enclaves is key to lure the rising middle class out of the urban centers (Wu 2006).

Most observers tend to ridicule simulacrascapes, associating them with the greediness of Chinese developers, a lack of creativity on the part of designers, and the tastelessness of consumers. Yet the diffusion of simulacrascapes does not imply an uncritical appropriation of Western styles. Not only do rigid dichotomies between what is a copy or an original not apply to the Chinese cultural context (Kloet and Scheen 2013), but many Chinese designers have built themed settings in order to gain the financial security that allows them to experiment creatively somewhere else (Li 2008; Xue 2006). Furthermore, the users and creators of simulacrascapes are perfectly aware of and are willing to cope with their ironies and paradoxes (Bosker 2013; Greenspan 2014; Oakes 2006). Simulacrascapes—their origin and success—thus reveal the specific nuances and contradictions of China’s transitions. More broadly, the proliferation of themed residential environments in the Chinese context speaks to the increasing importance of theming in the fabrication of urban landscapes worldwide.

A themed environment is spatially and semantically organized around an overarching motif that evokes an exotic “Other”: an-

other time, another place, another culture. The narrative of the theme materializes through architectural features and is reinforced by nonmaterial components such as sounds, smells, and flavors. Although the themes vary according to local preferences, developers and designers draw them from the repertoire of popular culture in order to appeal to as many people as possible (Hannigan 2010). Since the Second World War, the theme park developed as a systematized, reproducible, and standardized model for urban design. With the arrival of Disneyland in 1955, critics, architects, and developers came to see the theme park template as a plausible alternative to the modernist city (Gottdiener 1997). Themed experiences are indeed increasingly part of our daily lives today. As drastic changes have restructured global socioeconomic and cultural landscapes over the last thirty years, cities compete with one another to attract capital. Powerful actors develop formulas for urban growth that capitalize on the semiotics of culture. Exploited globally, the urban theme park growth model materializes in revitalization projects, adaptive reuses, and ex novo developments of ready-made, prepackaged “places” (Bryman 2004).

Most scholars criticize theming, arguing that it produces a fake, exclusionary, and controlling city. Some critics believe that themed settings symbolize “a filtered version of the experience of cities” (Boddy 1992, 124), resulting in a deceptive, fake urban environment (Huxtable 1997). Other scholars focus on how the visual symbolism and built forms of themed spaces control behavior and keep out vulnerable subjects. Disney City’s landscapes materialize the fantasies and aspirations of consumers while enabling mechanisms of control that blend consumption, repression, and exclusion (Sorkin 1992; Zukin 1995). The themed atmosphere normalizes certain behavioral and aesthetic codes, implicitly pushing out those who do not look or act “properly” (Boyer 1993; Kohn 2010). The design of urban form also serves the exclusionary character of theming. Corporate themed plazas, for example, are seemingly open to all, but in reality their urban furniture and layout impede specific behaviors—staying for prolonged periods, lying down, or remaining unnoticed—which, in practice, marginalizes specific, disenfranchised publics (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998). Emphasizing these discriminative

aspects of theming, most critics have argued that the ordered, sanitized, and phony spaces of the “fake” city impede a “real” encounter with difference and thus the formation of a democratic society (see, e.g., Harvey 1989; Rojek 2000; Soja 1992).

But themed landscapes are more complicated than this dominant narrative conveys. For one, theming is far from a deceptive enterprise. As Umberto Eco (1986) observed, not only are the users of themed settings perfectly aware that they are experiencing a “fake,” but part of their enjoyment lies precisely in the conscious experience of the constructed atmosphere. Moreover, as other scholars have argued, the users of Disney City challenge its hegemonic aspects by appropriating its spaces and establishing alternative meanings. At times, people protest the controlling aspect of theming through organized dissent (Warren 2005). More often, users reify, negotiate, or subvert the narratives of themed settings through quotidian uses and tactical appropriations.

Spaces mean different things to different people. Scholars of urbanism have long taught us that we negotiate, produce, and resist the meanings of the built environment by walking, acting, and sensing the city (Chase et al. 1999; de Certeau 1984). Researchers in heritage studies have explored these dynamics, concentrating on how we interpret the meanings of authenticity in the tourism experience. Since the 1970s, they have discussed whether authenticity is a quality that only “originals” possess—a quality thus linked to the material originality of artifacts—or whether authenticity is a social construct that individuals negotiate in relation to their beliefs and expectations. Building on the former argument, scholars in the early 2000s have increasingly agreed that we should understand authenticity not as a finite quality but as a relational, dynamic, practice-related condition that we establish among ourselves and the world around us (Holtorf 2013; Knudsen and Waade 2010).

The spatial appropriations and significations of the users of themed spaces, then, make them into authentic lived spaces, in Lefebvrian terms. These dynamics become especially apparent in Thames Town, where the ways people understand, exploit, and complicate the British atmosphere determine the social and physical production of space. I investigate this process through

qualitative fieldwork with four groups of users: the residents, the tourists, the visiting couples engaged to be married, and the employees (security guards and migrant construction workers). I especially look at how users' sentiments toward the British theme influence the ways in which they engage with the spaces of the town.

Three questions structure my exploration: (1) Why do people choose to be in Thames Town? (2) For whom are these spaces open and desirable, and for whom do they remain unappealing or closed off? And (3), when and why do the users of Thames Town follow its script, and when do they break from that script? Observation, survey questionnaires, and interviews helped me understand how the presence of the theme affects users' behaviors in both the free-access downtown area and the six gated communities surrounding it.

My fieldwork revealed that the symbolism of the built environment influences the spatial practices of the diverse groups in different ways. The British theme triggers the enthusiasm of the visitors, couples, and residents, who simultaneously consume and construct Thames Town's unique atmosphere. Although the groups coexist in town, they do not necessarily overlap in their immediate spaces. Only the engaged couples and the tourists mix in the downtown area, where the English theme is most obvious. The atmosphere of the village enhances the playfulness of the couples, who are made to feel like celebrities for a day. The tourists purchase European food and goods to augment the Britishness of their experience.

The affluent inhabitants interpret the Englishness of Thames Town as a mark of distinction and confine themselves within the gated areas so as not to mix with the visitors. The residents play with the core English theme in their choice of home furnishings. Some give their interiors an "English style," appropriating and resignifying Western symbols—Christmas decorations, Catholic items, or British TV characters. Other residents choose Chinese décor. In this, they are motivated partly by nationalistic pride and partly by the pleasure of exercising their freedom to choose—something unimaginable two decades ago—and the ability to purchase in whatever style they like.

The themed atmosphere influences the behavior of Thames Town's users. Visitors, couples, and residents abstain from acting in ways they believe inappropriate. Most residents, for example, avoid hanging their laundry outside to dry—a very common practice in China—to safeguard the “English” atmosphere. Some residents confine themselves to the non-English parts of their houses and leave the English areas untouched, as if they were museum exhibits. For instance, two of the villa owners I met each kept two kitchens in their homes: The open, Western-style kitchen was only for appearances' sake. These residents used their second enclosed kitchens for cooking, feeling that doing so helped them keep the whole house from smelling like food. Equally careful to not spoil the British feeling of Thames Town are the tourists, who refrain from sitting, eating, or disposing of trash unless they find equipment designated for those activities.

The exclusionary implications of theming are apparent in the town. While the residents and visitors consciously change their behavior to conform to and preserve the British atmosphere, the migrant workers are subject to the control and repression of community managers and guards. Most residents and business owners ask the guards to reprimand anyone who spoils the British atmosphere; this policy has the practical effect of marginalizing the migrant construction workers. In most gated communities, the migrants are not allowed to cook, smoke, hang washing, or even sit outside the units they are renovating. Since they are forbidden to make themselves visible inside the residential clusters, the workers gather outside the gates. Some also squat in vacant downtown condominiums, where they are unofficially tolerated and feel less constrained.

Like other Disneyfied landscapes around the world, however, Thames Town is not a space of ubiquitous repression and control. The town's constructed authenticity and the rules enforced to conserve such authenticity also provide the conditions for unexpected appropriations. These appropriations reflect people's desire either to participate in the theme or to avoid the staged atmosphere. Couples who cannot afford to pay a wedding salon, for example, use the sidewalks and streets of the downtown area like dressing rooms. The presence of these informal couples disturbs the man-

agers of the salons, who ask the guards to remove them from the streets. When asked to move, however, the do-it-yourself brides and grooms usually ignore the guards, claiming the right to occupy the street as much as any other (more affluent) couple. For their part, guards and migrant workers find interstitial spaces, zones in between the most iconic areas, to spend time away from the judgment of residents and tourists. A few guards occupy the vacant units downtown along with the migrants or sleep in the porters' lodge—the one-room structure built at the entrance to each gated area. Some guards also participate in the informal night markets. Despite official prohibition, street vendors and guards sell food and necessities to the migrant workers in front of the gated areas. The gates and porter's lodges, meant for control, thus ironically become spaces where surveillance is loose because the theme is absent and the residents won't protest. Even the spaces of spontaneous appropriations, then, ultimately depend on how different users cope with their own or others' ideas of authenticity.

The spaces of Thames Town exist because the notion of authenticity govern their physical and social production. Developers and designers fabricated the English atmosphere, making Thames Town a space of conceived and represented authenticity. But its diverse users transform Thames Town into an authentic lived space through their everyday bodily and affective practices. Authenticity then simultaneously includes and excludes the users of Thames Town by creating a specific politics of belonging. Ideas of “the authentic” work as a cohesive device when the residents, the tourists, and the couples preserve and construct Thames Town's unique atmosphere through their behaviors. The moral and aesthetic judgments that users associate with the village's “authentic Britishness” also facilitate the exclusion of the migrant workers. But authenticity—the desire to enjoy Englishness, or the need to stay away from it in order to avoid punishment—also encourages contingent and unexpected appropriations of space. The provisional wedding rehearsal rooms on the streets and the informal night markets in front of the gated communities are cases in point.

The ironies and paradoxes of Thames Town reveal how authenticity intervenes holistically in the production of space. The urban processes associated with “the authentic” enable the exclusion of

vulnerable subjects, but they equally create unique spatial and social ecologies. Thames Town spaces, and the people who daily shape them, urge us to abandon preconceived notions of “real” and “fake” and to pay more attention to how authenticity makes and remakes the city.



Figure 1. Sign welcoming visitors to Thames Town’s downtown.



Figure 2. A couple poses in front of the church downtown.



Figure 3. The British-evoking environment of Thames Town, including Western street names and a statue of Churchill.



Figure 4. Downtown Thames Town's Lady Diana statue, in front of a construction site.



Figure 5. Engaged couples and photographers taking a break during their photo shoots.



Figure 6. A bride getting ready for her photo shoot inside the Lili wedding salon.



Figure 7. A couple, “princess and prince,” posing in front of a “French” trolley bus in Holiday Square.



Figure 8. The gates of Kensington Garden.



Figure 9. The residential typologies of Thames Town. From the top, five-to-six story condos in the downtown areas and terraced houses in Kensington Garden include units ranging from 60 to 260 m² (646/2,799 ft²). The villas of the gated compounds vary between 300 and 600 m² (3,230/6,458 ft²).



Figure 10. The green areas between the terrace houses of Kensington Garden.



Figure 11. A teenaged resident of Rowland Heights sitting in the living room of his villa.



Figure 12. The Chinese interiors of a villa in Hampton Garden.



Figure 13. A migrant worker and her grandchild, downtown. They live in the unit under construction and cook on the street in front of it.



Figure 14. “Do-it-yourself” couples getting ready for their photo shoots on the sidewalks of downtown.

WHAT FOLLOWS

I organize the rest of this work in four chapters. Chapter 1 synthesizes the historical evolution of the theme park model and the criticism surrounding it. I especially combine the discourses on theming with the conversations on the privatization of public space. Acknowledging the exclusionary and controlling aspects of themed settings, I nonetheless suggest that the day-to-day activities conducted in themed settings and the attachment that users develop toward such settings complicate the mainstream critiques of theming.

Introducing Thames Town, Chapter 2 explains the production of themed residential environments in the context of China's transition to a market economy. Scholarly conversations on transplanted cityscapes within and outside China prove that simulacrascapes materialize nuanced sociocultural and economic processes. Places like Thames Town, then, cannot be easily dismissed as "kitsch" appropriations.

In Chapter 3, I present the data collected through fieldwork. I describe the specific politics of belonging that emerge in the village because of the British theme. The Western appearance of the buildings and the values that people associate with such appearance inspire the behaviors of all the users of Thames Town, enabling the inclusion and exclusion of different groups.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I analyze the data collected, drawing from the discourses on authenticity in heritage and tourism studies. In understanding authenticity as a relational process rather than as a fixed quality, I argue that authenticity makes Thames Town a unique place in space and time by affecting the physical and social production of space.